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Afghanistan: Continuing need for refugee protection

Amnesty International is concerned that the situation in Afghanistan is not conducive to the promotion of voluntary repatriation.

"In light of the current high rate of refugee returns, lack of absorption capacity to handle those returns and continued insecurity in Afghanistan, now is not the time for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and states to be encouraging and promoting the return of Afghan refugees," Amnesty International said.

In a report published today, *Continuing need for Protection and Standards for Return of Afghan refugees*, Amnesty International stressed that "the maintenance of international standards is critical to ensuring protection and safe and dignified return. Failure to respect international standards scrupulously may lead to renewed cycles of displacement," the organization said.

The report sets out standards which Amnesty International considers essential to ensuring sustainable return of Afghan refugees in safety and in dignity.

Amnesty International also called on the UNHCR to clarify its position on the return of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers, following an ambiguous statement from the refugee agency last week, advising governments "to give active counselling to Afghan asylum-seekers on possibilities for assisted return" as the time was now "ripe for Afghans ... to be offered the option of voluntary repatriation". "UNHCR appears to be both encouraging states to work towards returns, while itself claiming not to be promoting such returns." the organization said.

In early July, returns of internally displaced persons (IDPs) were suspended by UNHCR because of volatile security conditions in the north of the country. This followed reported escalating violence and a deterioration of the human rights situation in parts of northern and central Afghanistan. Only two weeks later, the UNHCR is now claiming conditions are 'ripe' for return.

Amnesty International also noted that UNHCR took a far more cautious approach in Kosovo, notably stating that certain persons should not directly or indirectly be compelled, unduly influenced, induced or encouraged to return. "This approach is not evident in the way returns to Afghanistan are being handled," Amnesty International observed.

Amnesty International expressed concern that governments such as those of Australia and the United Kingdom may use the UNHCR's announcement to validate the active steps that they have already been taking to encourage the return of Afghans.

"States should refrain from using any forced or coercive measures to return any refugee to Afghanistan. No one should ever be forcibly returned, whether directly or indirectly, to a country where they may face serious human rights abuses," the organization stressed.

"Those deciding Afghan asylum claims must base their decisions on international standards of protection alone. The political priorities of any particular state are not part of those international standards," Amnesty International added.

The report *Continuing need for Protection and Standards for Return of Afghan refugees* is available on the website at:<http://www.web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/index/asa110142002>

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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